

**ATTACHMENT C**

**to**

**Reply Comments of Western Wireless**

**in**

**FEDERAL-STATE JOINT BOARD ON UNIVERSAL  
SERVICE SEEKS COMMENT ON CERTAIN OF THE  
COMMISSION'S RULES RELATING TO HIGH-COST  
UNIVERSAL SERVICE SUPPORT AND THE ETC  
DESIGNATION PROCESS**

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# **Rate of Return Regulation: A Failed Model for Economic Regulation**

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## **Introduction**

Rate of return regulation, in one form or another, has been used since the late nineteenth century to set and constrain the earnings and price levels for economically regulated companies.<sup>1</sup> In the last fifteen years, however, it has been widely supplanted by alternative mechanisms to set prices and control earnings of telecommunications carriers in the United States and many foreign countries. In particular, the FCC has adopted alternative forms of regulation to, in chronological order, set interexchange carrier rates, interstate access rates, and unbundled network element and transport and termination charges, and establish the high cost support payments for those regulated carriers serving the vast majority of customers in the U.S. State commissions have also abandoned rate of return regulation for the most part, with only six commissions continuing to use rate of return regulation for the RBOCs in their states.<sup>2</sup> At the FCC, the single exception to this wholesale abandonment of rate of return regulation has been its continued application to the development of the interstate access rates charged and the universal fund payments received by smaller incumbent LECs.

This paper addresses the infirmities, both theoretical and practical, of rate of return regulation that have been identified by the FCC in the past and suggests that the time has come to commence a serious and concerted effort to develop a forward looking economic cost (FLEC) model to determine the universal service receipts for rural ILECs and, potentially, their interstate access rates. If, however, as been found in the past, this is deemed impracticable, the Commission should, at a minimum, establish comprehensive auditing standards and requirements over ILEC reporting of USF costs to ensure their accuracy and compliance with the applicable Part 32, 36, 54, 64 and 65 Rules. Given the magnitude of the “unexplained” growth in payments to the ILECs<sup>3</sup>, the potential and incentives for companies to overstate their USF eligible costs, and documented abuses of the rate of return process in the past, additional scrutiny of carriers’ USF reporting is essential to ensure the integrity of the high cost USF mechanisms.

## **The FCC’s Rejection of Rate of Return Regulation**

For over fifteen years, the FCC has been evaluating the efficacy of rate of return regulation as a tool to achieve its regulatory objectives and has found it wanting in virtually all instances. While it is not the intent of this paper to provide an exhaustive history of the FCC’s findings and conclusions on rate of return regulation, it is worth noting some of the specific infirmities the Commission has identified in past proceedings because these remain relevant to this day. In particular, many of the Commission’s specific concerns over the incentives created by and the administration of a rate of return regulatory regime have, as will be discussed in a later section of this paper, been borne out by instances in which companies have been found to have manipulated the process for their benefit.

The first, and most comprehensive, evaluation of rate of return regulation by the Commission was conducted in the Price Cap proceeding in the late 1980s<sup>4</sup>, in which it replaced rate of return with price cap regulation as the mechanism for overseeing the interstate rates charged, initially, by AT&T and later the large ILECs. In the Notices and Orders in this proceeding, the Commission laid out in considerable detail its findings on the problems created by the incentives and administration of a rate of return regulatory regime. Principal among these were:

- Incentive to Pad Costs - “(R)ate of return regulation provides regulated firms with very strong incentives to pad their rates, for essentially two reasons. First, as a profit-maximizer, the firm is led to adopt the most costly, rather than the most efficient, investment strategies because its primary means of increasing dollar earnings under rate-of-return constraints is to enlarge its rate base. This is commonly known as the Averch-Johnson effect...of rate of return regulation. Second, since all operating expenses are included in a firm’s revenue requirement under rate of return, management has little incentive to minimize operating costs. This is commonly known as ‘X-inefficiency’. The firm’s shareholders profit from the first phenomenon and the benefits of the second redound to the firm’s management. In both cases, however, consumers suffer because these distorted incentives increase the cost of doing business –and thus the rates consumers must pay for service”<sup>5</sup> The impact of this was clearly demonstrated by the fact that, in 1990, “the Common Carrier Bureau has been able to identify and disallow over \$2.7 billion in LEC access charges since 1985.”<sup>6</sup>
- Lack of Incentives to Innovate - “The distorted efficiency incentives established by rate-of-return regulation also may have a negative effect on innovation. Clearly, rate-of-return establishes no incentive to ‘do the same old thing a better way’ – for example, by providing the same service at lower cost – because a carrier’s reward for such innovation is a reduction in its dollar earnings. Such regulation may well have similar effects on incentives to produce new products and services.....The limit on the ability of a carrier to earn returns on risky investments comparable with such risks, together with the potential that an unsuccessful project will result in cost disallowance, provide a reasonable basis to conclude that carriers have reduced incentives to undertake such risks under rate-of-return regulation. At best, rate-of-return regulation is ‘passive’ vis-à-vis innovation, neither fostering it nor encouraging it. We think the public interest is better served by the adoption of regulatory methods more attuned to stimulating innovation.”<sup>7</sup>
- Potential for Cross-Subsidization - “Carriers subject to this (rate of return) regulatory approach have an incentive to shift some of the costs of providing unregulated competitive services to regulated services, where they can be recovered from ratepayers rather than the consumers of regulated services who rightfully bear these costs. In so doing, the carrier can increase its profits and simultaneously disadvantage its competitors.”<sup>8</sup>  
“(W)e disagree with those who suggest that cross-subsidization can be addressed easily under rate-of-return regulation through ‘active and consistent oversight’. Such claims understate the difficulties inherent in oversight activities and ignore the long history of these difficulties. Concerns about different kinds of cross-subsidization have, in a very real sense, dominated federal telecommunication regulation since the advent of

competition in the 1950s, and were determined to be so intractable as to justify the draconian solution of divestiture of the Bell System. During the past few years, of course, we have implemented a number of regulatory techniques to discourage cross-subsidization between regulated and unregulated activities and improve our oversight capabilities....While these steps will act as a strong deterrent to cross-subsidization activities, our policies and programs can do no more than deter and attempt to detect such activities, they cannot eliminate the powerful incentive that rate-of-return regulation establishes to engage in cross-subsidization.”<sup>9</sup>

- Administrative Transparency - “(A)dministering rate of return regulation in order to counteract these incentives is a difficult and complex process, even when done correctly and well....(S)uch regulation is built on the premise that a regulator can determine accurately what cost are necessary to deliver service. In practice, however, a regulator may have difficulty obtaining accurate cost information as the carrier itself is the source of nearly all the information about its costs. Furthermore, no regulator has the resources to review in detail the thousands of individual business judgments a carrier makes before it decides, for example, to install a new switching system.”<sup>10</sup>

There is no evidence to indicate, and considerable evidence to the contrary, that rate of return regulation as applied to establish universal service funding and interstate access rates for the rural ILECs avoids the pitfalls identified by the Commission over a decade ago. The incentive to pad costs, lack of incentives to innovate, potential for cross-subsidization and lack of transparency of the underlying cost data are as much problems today as they were then.

In subsequent proceedings, the Commission has reaffirmed its rejection of rate of return regulation, albeit without the detailed analysis it undertook in the Price Cap proceeding. In the Local Competition proceeding, which established the pricing standards for unbundled network elements and interconnection, the Commission found that:

(A) cost-based pricing methodology based on forward-looking economic costs....is the approach for setting prices that best furthers the goals of the 1996 Act. In dynamic competitive markets, firms take action based not on embedded costs, but on the relationship between market-determined prices and forward-looking economic costs..... New entrants should make their decisions whether to purchase unbundled elements or build their own facilities based on the relative economic costs of these options. By contrast, because the cost of building an element is based on forward-looking economic costs, new entrants investment decisions would be distorted if the price of unbundled elements were based on embedded costs.<sup>11</sup>

The Commission went on to elaborate:

We are not persuaded by incumbent LEC arguments that prices for interconnection and unbundled network elements must or should include any difference between the embedded costs they have incurred to provide those elements and their current economic costs. Neither a methodology that establishes prices for interconnection and access to network elements directly on the costs reflected in the regulated books of account, nor a

price based on forward-looking costs plus an additional amount reflecting embedded costs, would be consistent with the approach we are adopting. The substantial weight of economic commentary in the record suggests that an ‘embedded cost’-based pricing methodology would be pro-competitor—in this case the incumbent LEC—rather than pro-competition. We therefore decline to adopt embedded costs as the appropriate basis of setting prices for interconnection and access to network elements.<sup>12</sup>

In this proceeding, unlike the Price Cap and Universal Service (discussed below) proceedings, no exception to forward looking economic cost (FLEC) based pricing requirements was made for rural ILECs.

Finally, in establishing a universal service support mechanism for non-rural carriers, the Joint Board (later affirmed by the Commission) again found that the application of FLEC using a proxy model to establish support levels would best meet the Act and the Commission’s universal service objectives. The Joint Board stated:

We conclude that setting support at forward-looking economic cost levels will allow us to construct a universal service support mechanism that will preserve and advance universal service and encourage efficiency. Competitive firms will provide service using an approximately efficient level of resources because, in those instances when revenues are not sufficient, the support mechanism will provide the additional funds required to maintain service. In principle, using cost estimates generated by proxy models is a reasonable technique for determining forward-looking costs. Proxy models, because they are not based on any individual company’s costs, provide a competitively neutral estimate of the cost of providing supported services<sup>13</sup>

In this proceeding, both the Joint Board and Commission indicated their intent eventually to base universal service support for rural carriers on forward-looking costs, but, because “the proposed models could not at this time precisely model small, rural carriers’ cost”<sup>14</sup>, the Commission would continue to use a slightly modified version of the existing embedded cost-based mechanisms until January 1, 2001. The Commission found that this would provide sufficient time to develop a model that would accurately predict rural carriers’ forward-looking economic costs. Nevertheless, the Commission fully recognized the problems with continuing to use an embedded cost mechanism for rural carriers, stating:

We find that the current support mechanisms neither ensure that ILECS are operating efficiently nor encourage them to do so. Indeed, by guaranteeing carriers recovery of 100 percent of all loop costs in excess of 150 percent of the national average loop cost, the current high cost funding mechanisms effectively discourage efficiency. Thus, we agree with CSE that calculating high cost support based on embedded cost is contrary to sound economic policy. We conclude that basing support on forward-looking economic cost or perhaps competitive bidding will require telecommunications carriers to operate efficiently and will facilitate the move to competition in all telecommunications markets.<sup>15</sup>

The Joint Board then established the Rural Task Force (RTF) to recommend modifications to the high cost support mechanisms for rural carriers. The RTF found that significant anomalies resulted when the FCC's synthesis (proxy) model was applied to rural carriers, including large differences between model results and actual data for line counts, wire center areas, route miles of outside plant, type of outside plant construction, COE investment and other costs.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the RTF recommended that the Commission continue to use a modified embedded cost mechanism until 2006 to allow time to develop a long term rural mechanism that functions efficiently, is better coordinated with the non-rural mechanism, and effectively targets support to rural carriers serving the highest cost areas. The Commission subsequently adopted the RTF's recommendation.<sup>17</sup>

Although Western Wireless will continue to support maintaining the status quo until 2006, the Company believes it is time for the Commission and the Joint Board to begin a concerted effort to develop a FLEC model that effectively and accurately estimates the efficient cost of providing supported services for rural carriers. This effort could also involve a review of the existing synthesis model used for non-rural carriers and the inclusion of wireless costs to ensure a coordinated approach to universal service funding for all segments of the industry. The development of a new FLEC model should commence as soon as possible because the process will inevitably be controversial and require considerable time and resources (similar to the process of developing the synthesis model). However, Western believes that, due to advances in modeling, mapping and geocoding techniques since the development of the synthesis model, the problems in the application of that model to rural carriers identified by the RTF can potentially be overcome.<sup>18</sup>

As was discussed above, the Commission has fully evaluated the effectiveness of and incentives created by rate of return regulation and consistently found it wanting. These problems have not been cured by the passage of time. As will be discussed in the next section of this paper, in those few publicly documented instances in which the Commission (or the NECA) has been compelled to fully investigate the data reported by rate of return carriers, they have almost inevitably found serious problems. None of this is surprising and provides further evidence of the need to abandon rate of return regulation for all telecommunications carriers.

### **Manipulation of the Rate of Return Process**

Unsurprisingly, carriers frequently act on the incentives created by rate of return regulation. This is especially true with respect to interstate intercarrier compensation received by ILECs under rate of return mechanisms, such as access charges, settlements, and universal service funding. As a mechanism for collecting revenue, intercarrier compensation has a number of advantages over the provision of retail services, especially for smaller ILECs: the process is well established and operates relatively automatically (through NECA, USAC and CABS); there are no marketing costs; revenues are relatively unaffected by a company's own customers' demand elasticities; historically (at least until the WorldCom and Global Crossing bankruptcies), there were very low levels of uncollectibles; and, the level of scrutiny of reported costs is relatively low (especially in comparison to the scrutiny accorded in state rate case and show cause proceedings). Consequently, rate of return ILECs have every incentive, and in many cases the

ability, to maximize their revenues from interstate access services and the universal service fund and it appears they have done so.

There are a number of indicators that suggest rate of return ILECs have engaged in, or attempted to engage in, interstate revenue maximization over the years. For example, as was noted above, the FCC in 1990 indicated that they had disallowed over \$2.7 billion in LEC access charges since 1985 under rate of return regulation.<sup>19</sup> In addition, in its Comments, Western identified an increase of over \$191 million in the ILEC portion of the USF since 1999 that cannot be explained by regulatory changes (MAG, CALLS and RTF) implemented during that period.<sup>20</sup> Further, AT&T, in a recent ex parte filing, showed that rate of return carriers filing Form 492 Reports had experienced interstate overearnings of over \$218 million in the 2001-2002 period, following overearnings of approximately \$92 million in 1999-2000 and \$121 million in 1997-1998.<sup>21</sup> These indicators clearly show that carriers have acted on the incentives created by rate of return regulation and, apparently, increasingly successfully in recent years.

There have been a number of instances in the relatively recent past in which rate of return carriers have been found to have violated or egregiously manipulated the Commission's accounting and costing rules in order to maximize their interstate revenues. While Western believes that these examples merely represent the tip of the iceberg, they are illustrative of ways in which carriers have acted on the incentives created by rate of return regulation. They also provide some guidance on areas in which the Commission could enhance its oversight of rate of return carriers until it can implement a FLEC model for determining all carriers' universal service receipts.

#### **Virgin Islands Telephone Company (VITELCO) Interest Expense**

In 1990, VITELCO filed a Request for Declaratory Ruling with the Commission to resolve a dispute with NECA (of which it was a member) over the treatment of interest expense in its cost study. Atlantic Tele-Network Company had purchased VITELCO from ITT and borrowed approximately \$100 million to finance the purchase, of which \$60 million was recorded on VITELCO's books. VITELCO took the position that it should not be required to deduct the interest expense from its return allowance for the purpose of determining its federal income tax expense for ratemaking purposes (which would decrease its interstate revenue requirement). The Commission, however, disagreed, noting that the company's regulated plant was pledged as security for the loan and upheld NECA's interpretation of this issue.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Direct Assignment under Part 36**

When the Commission replaced the Part 67 jurisdictional separations procedures with Part 36 in 1987,<sup>23</sup> it allowed for the direct assignment of certain plant costs to the interstate or intrastate jurisdiction if the facility was used exclusively to provide interstate or intrastate services. A number of carriers began to use direct assignment quite extensively, most of which were direct assignments to interstate services, and the Commission was forced to clarify that it intended a relatively limited role for direct assignment in the separations process.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company had attempted to construe an allocation of trunk testing expense it had developed as a permitted direct assignment and a number of carriers



directly assigned portions of corporate operations expense rather than use the prescribed allocation factor. In each of these instances, the Commission rejected the carriers' position as a misinterpretation of Part 36.<sup>25</sup>

### **NECA Audits of the RBOCs' Common Line Pool Reporting**

The Commission had found that the RBOCs had made some unusually large adjustments to the NECA Common Line (CL) Pool in December 1988 (shortly before they were permitted to exit the Common Line Pool), adjustments apparently encouraged by RBOC members of the NECA Board. As a result, the Commission ordered NECA to commission an audit of the RBOCs' reported adjustments to the CL Pool from January 1988 through March 1989. The results of this audit revealed misstatements or miscalculations of interstate costs and revenues during this period of \$37.8 million for NYNEX, \$23.2 million for Bell Atlantic, \$22.8 million for Ameritech, \$16.2 million for US West, \$9.7 million for Southwestern Bell, \$6.2 million for Bell South and \$3.4 million for Pacific Bell. Most of these misstatements were found to have benefited the companies at the expense of interstate ratepayers. The audit uncovered a wide range of violations of Parts 32, 36, 64, 65 and 69 of the Commission's Rules and related policies.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, each of the RBOCs entered into Consent Decrees with the Commission which required the carriers to, depending on the individual carrier, make exogenous price cap adjustments of up to \$13.7 million (Bell Atlantic), conduct audits of their internal controls and/or correct their accounting practices to conform to the Commission's Rules.<sup>27</sup>

### **1997 Annual Access Tariff Filings-Cash Working Capital**

In investigating the 1997 annual access tariff filing of several rate of return carriers, the Commission identified significant problems with the lead-lag studies used by these carriers to develop the cash working capital component of the rate base. The Commission had established a 15-day standard allowance (i.e. revenues are collected, on average, 15 days after the payment of cash expenses) which, when multiplied by average daily cash expense, produces the rate base cash working capital allowance. Carriers are, however, allowed to use a longer net lag if supported by a properly performed lead-lag study.<sup>28</sup> The cash working capital of four carriers was based on net lag days far in excess of the standard allowance, ranging from 46 days for Concord Telephone Company to 71.8 days for Puerto Rico Telephone Company. The Commission's review of the companies' lead lag studies revealed a raft of problems, including large out-of-period or retroactive adjustments, outdated studies that failed to reflect current operations, and inconsistent study periods. Consequently, the Commission ordered all four carriers to revert to the 15-day standard allowance and provide refunds with interest.<sup>29</sup>

### **ACS of Anchorage Traffic Factors**

In 2000, GCI (an Alaskan IXC and CLEC) filed a complaint alleging that ATU, ACS' predecessor, had been counting ISP traffic as interstate, rather than intrastate, and counting only a single dial equipment minute (DEM) rather than two for intraoffice local calls in developing its interstate traffic sensitive access rates. This was in direct contravention of established Commission policies and resulted in ATU earning a rate of return on its traffic sensitive services of over 32%, far in excess of its allowed rate of return of 11.25%. The Commission ruled

against ATU and awarded damages with interest.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, in December, 2001, in its tariff filing in response to the MAG Order, ACS of Anchorage continued to use as its baseline revenue requirement for this filing, the same revenue requirement it had used in 2000 i.e. based on the traffic factors disallowed by the Commission. Consequently, the Commission rejected ACS' filed rates as unjust and unreasonable to the extent they were based on the unlawful traffic factors.<sup>31</sup>

### **Moultrie Independent Telephone Company High Cost Reporting**

In 1997, Moultrie Independent Telephone Company, a small rural ILEC in Illinois, transferred ownership of many of its non-loop assets to an affiliate and then leased them back at cost to the telephone company, treating the lease cost as an operating expense and excluding the asset costs from the rate base. When Moultrie submitted its 1997 cost study to the NECA, this treatment resulted in its high cost loop fund payments going from \$15 per year per loop to \$433, as Moultrie's accounting treatment resulted in a much larger proportion of its operating expenses being assigned to the loop element. NECA rejected Moultrie's cost study on the ground that it violated the Part 36 requirement that, when substantial amounts of property are leased back to a company by an affiliate for cost study purposes, the property should be treated as if it is owned by the telephone company. The Commission upheld NECA's interpretation and ordered Moultrie to resubmit its cost studies reflecting the proper treatment of the sale-leaseback transaction.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, carriers have acted on the incentives created by rate of return regulation in order to maximize their interstate USF and access revenues. The examples cited above likely represent only those instances in which the attempt to manipulate the process was sufficiently blatant that the NECA, interveners and/or the Commission stepped in to address and remedy the violations. Other instances likely either remain undetected or are dealt with through the NECA/USAC oversight functions. Unfortunately, the results of these organizations' audits or reviews of carriers' USF related data reporting are not publicly available, so Western is unable to evaluate the effectiveness of these oversight functions.

### **Enhancement of the USF Oversight Process**

Western strongly believes that high cost support for all carriers should be based on an appropriately designed FLEC model to eliminate the incentives to pad costs, enhance efficiency incentives, eliminate the potential for cross-subsidization and render the underlying input data transparent to all parties, not just the ILECS. Nevertheless, Western commits to maintaining the status quo through 2006 and recognizes that such a model will take at least that long to develop. Until that time, or if the effort to develop a FLEC model for rural carriers is ultimately deemed infeasible, Western believes that enhanced oversight of the cost and line count data submitted by ETCs may go a long way towards stemming the growth of the high cost fund.

A number of factors suggest that stronger oversight of the high cost fund is necessary to enhance the transparency of the process and limit the potential for abuse:

- While NECA does review rate of return carriers' cost study and high cost fund submissions, the scope and outcomes of these reviews are not made public. Consequently, it is not possible for outside parties to evaluate the effectiveness of these reviews and their effect on carriers' compliance with the Commission's Rules and policies.
- NECA simply does not have sufficient staff to conduct stringent reviews/audits of all carriers' cost data. According to its web site, NECA has only 48 "Member Services" staff, the personnel responsible for cost study reviews, in its seven regional offices. Because these NECA personnel also have other responsibilities and over 1,500 companies<sup>33</sup> receive high cost support, it would be physically impossible for NECA to conduct comprehensive reviews of all or even a significant number of carriers' cost data. Further, USAC had only seven internal auditors and spent only a little over a million dollars in 2002 on external audit services for oversight of all the USF programs, not just high cost.<sup>34</sup>
- Given the composition of its Board of Directors, it is unclear whether NECA is sufficiently independent of rate of return ILEC interests to support a strong oversight function. Of its fifteen member Board of Directors, six are from Subset Three, representing the smaller ILECs, the two Subset Two Directors, representing the midsize ILECs, are from rate of return carriers that receive considerable USF (Century and TDS) and, of the five outside Directors, two are former RUS administrators and one is from an affiliate of a rate of return ILEC.
- While the well publicized problems with the E-Rate programs have not yet spilled over into the high cost fund programs, these problems demonstrate that participants do act in the incentives created by these programs and that the existing oversight functions have not been adequate to curb the potential for abuse.

In order to enhance oversight of the high cost programs, Western recommends that the following programs and policies be put in place:

- Carriers' cost studies and other data submissions supporting their high cost funding should be made publicly available. Inasmuch as USF is essentially a form of public funding, the basis for this funding should be a matter of public record. The data available would include Part 36 and 69 cost studies and supporting workpapers, the company's Part 64 Manual and resulting regulated/nonregulated cost allocations, details of all affiliate transactions involving the regulated telephone operation, financial statements for the telephone company and all its affiliates, LSS and HCL calculations, and line counts. As this is similar to the type of data provided by rate of return carriers subject to the FCC's Tariff Review Process and in state rate cases, there is ample precedent for making this type of data available for public scrutiny. Carriers would have the opportunity to request confidentiality for any data considered competitively sensitive. Given that many of the attempts to manipulate the rate of return process discussed in the previous section were first identified by parties other than the Commission or NECA, this expansion of the universe of "overseers" would facilitate the identification of potential instances of abuse.

- The results of any reviews of cost studies or other data submissions involving high cost funding conducted by NECA or USAC over the past three years should be made publicly available. This would enable outside parties to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing oversight process. Again, there is precedent for releasing such information, for example, the FCC's release of the results of its audits of the RBOCs' continuing property records ("CPRs") in 1999.<sup>35</sup>
- If, as Western suspects, review of the information provided pursuant to the above recommendations indicates that the existing oversight processes are inadequate to detect many instances of abuse, an enhanced audit/review process should be put in place. This process should have the following features:
  - Audits of the data underlying the high cost submissions of every carrier receiving "substantial amounts of USF would be conducted every three years, more frequently if there were a significant increase in a company's year over year funding requests. The audits would encompass the previous three years of data submissions.
  - The audits would be conducted by truly independent firms (*i.e.*, public accounting firms, *not* consulting firms with other relationships with rural ILECs) following a scope of work approved by the Commission.
  - To ensure independence, the audit firm(s) would be selected and supervised by the FCC and/or USAC.
  - The audits would be conducted on relatively short notice to ensure company records weren't manipulated or falsified.
  - Companies would be required to provide full access to their books and records.
  - The results of the audits would be made publicly available.
  - Companies found to have violated the Commission's Rules and policies in their submissions would not only be required to repay the amount of excess funding received but would be subject to fines for significant violations e.g. claiming more than 110% of what they were due. In truly egregious cases, the carrier would become ineligible for future funding.

Western believes these audits should be as comprehensive as possible to ensure the integrity of the high cost funding process. While it is not the intent of this paper to fully define the scope of work for the audit process, at least the following types of issues should be reviewed:

- Loop Counts – Are all loops classified accurately (especially those between the switch and ISPs and ISDN-PRI versus digital trunk lines)? Are subscriber line charges assessed correctly?

- Investment Classifications – Are only facilities providing service in the study area reflected in reported costs? Do the company's CPRs and circuit counts support the assignment of C&WF between the subscriber, exchange trunk, interexchange and host/remote categories? Are remote switches and concentrators appropriately classified according to RAO Letter 21? Are the costs of Class 4/5 switches accurately allocated between the tandem and local switching categories? Are DSL costs fully captured and assigned to the appropriate categories and jurisdiction based on the speed and type the services provided? Are all building costs, especially CO buildings, treated as such? Do direct assignments of investments or expenses conform to Commission policies?
- Part 64 – Does the company maintain and follow an up-to-date Part 64 Manual? Does it conform to the Commission's prescribed cost allocation hierarchy? Are adequate internal controls in place? Is the general allocator appropriately developed and applied?
- Affiliate Transactions – Are only recoverable costs under the Part 65 Rules included in management fees or other charges from unregulated affiliates (excluding items such as acquisition adjustments, lobbying costs, etc.)? Are these charges booked to the correct Part 32 accounts for the functions provided by the affiliate? Do any sale and lease back arrangements reflect the Part 36 substantial property requirement?
- Accounting Classifications – Are costs, especially those that would be subject to the HCL Fund corporate cap, booked to the correct Part 32 accounts? Is interest expense on debt secured by the assets of the telephone company shown on the regulated books and reflected in calculation of federal and state income tax allowances? Is interest during construction calculated correctly and reflected as a revenue requirement offset?
- Cash Working Capital – If the company does not use the 15-day standard allowance, does it have a current lead-lag study that follows the Commission's prescribed policies and practices? Do the minimum bank balances reflect only compensating balances?

Western believes that independent audits of company reporting practices that address issues such as those identified above would produce high cost fund savings far in excess of the cost of the audits themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The Commission has evaluated rate of return regulation in a variety of contexts over the last fifteen years and consistently found that it fails to meet its regulatory objectives. The incentive to pad costs, lack of incentives to innovate, potential for cross-subsidization and lack of transparency remain fundamental and intractable problems that have defied solution. And, as the examples provided in this paper demonstrate, companies have frequently acted on the incentives created and attempted to manipulate the system to their benefit. Adoption of an effective FLEC model to develop all carriers' universal service costs and funding would enable the Commission to abandon the failed rate of return mechanism once and for all. Until such time as a reliable and accurate FLEC model can be developed, or if that proves infeasible, until a viable alternative can

be developed, more stringent oversight of the high cost funding and reporting process should be instituted as proposed in this paper.

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1. Rate of return regulation is also referred to as rate base/rate of return, revenue requirement and embedded cost (at least since the abandonment of the fair value standard of asset valuation) regulation. These terms will be used interchangeably herein.

2. See map, *Retail Regulation of Local Telecommunications Providers*, NRRI, January 2003.

3. See *The Legal and Historical Background of the Federal Universal Fund System*, Hogan & Hartson, Attachment A to Western Wireless' Comments in this proceeding.

4. Re. *Policy and Rules Concerning Rates for Dominant Carriers*, CC Docket No. 87-313 ("Price Caps").

5. Price Caps, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 88-172, Para. 39 (1988).

6. Price Caps, Second Report and Order, FCC 90-314, Para. 234 (1990).

7. Price Caps, Further Notice, Op Cit. Para. 46-47

8. Id., Para. 48.

9. Id., Para. 52.

10. Price Caps, Report and Order and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 89-91, Para. 31 (1989).

11. Re *Implementation of the Local Competition Provisions in the Telecommunications Act of 1996*, First Report and Order, CC Docket No. 96-98, FCC 96-325, Para. 620 (1996).

12. Id., Para. 705

13. Re. *Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service*, Recommended Decision, CC Docket No. 96-45, FCC 96J-3, Para. 276 (1996)

14. Re. *Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service*, Report and Order, CC Docket No. 96-45, 12 FCC Rcd 8776, Para. 291 (1997)

15. Id, Para. 292.

16. Rural Task Force, White Paper No. 4, A Review of the FCC's Non-Rural Universal Service Fund Method and the Synthesis Model for Rural Telephone Companies, September 2000

17. *Federal State Joint Board on Universal Service, and Multi-Association Group Plan for Regulation of Interstate Services of Non-Price Cap Incumbent Local Exchange Carriers and Interexchange Carriers*, Fourteenth Report and Order, Twenty-Second Order on Reconsideration, and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in CC Docket No. 96-45, and Report and Order in CC Docket No. 00-256, 16 FCC Rcd 11244 (2001)

18. See *Proposal for a Competitive and Efficient Universal Service High Cost Funding Model/Platform* James Stegeman, Attachment I to Western's Comments

19. See fn 6

20. See fn 3, p. 6.

21. AT&T, Notice of Ex Parte Filing, CC Docket Nos. 00-256, 96-45, 98-77 and 98-166, May 9, 2003, Exhibit 1.

22. Re *Virgin Islands Telephone Company*, Memorandum Opinion and Order, AAD 90-19, DA 90-143 (1990), DA 91-707 (1991), FCC 92-504 (1992).

23. Amendment of Part 67 (New Part 36) of the Commission's Rules and Establishment of a Federal-State Joint Board, CC Docket No. 86-297, *Recommended Decision and Order*, 2 FCC 2d. 2582 (1987).

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24. Letter of Interpretation, Clarification of the Role of Direct Assignments in the Jurisdictional Separations Process, AAD 91-48, 6 FCC Rcd 5068 (1991).
  25. The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company, Petition for Wavier of the Common Carrier Bureau's Letter of Interpretation Dated August 21, 1991, *Memorandum Opinion and Order*, 7 FCC Rcd 3622 (1991).
  26. Re. Ameritech Operating Companies, Bell Atlantic Operating Telephone Companies, etc., *Orders to Show Cause*, AAD 93-146-152, FCC 95-72-78 (1995).
  27. Re. Ameritech Operating Companies, Bell Atlantic Operating Telephone Companies, etc, *Consent Decree Orders*, AAD 93-146-152, FCC 96-412-418 (1996).
  28. Amendment of Part 65 of the Commission's Rules to Prescribe Components of the Rate Bases and Net Income of Dominant Carriers, *Order on Reconsideration*, 4 FCC Rcd 1697 (1989)(*Rate Base Component Reconsideration Order*).
  29. Re. 1997 Annual Access Tariff Filings, Memorandum Opinion and Order, CC Docket No. 97-149, FCC 97-403, Para. 208-226 (1997).
  30. Re. General Communications, Inc. v. Alaska Communications Holdings, Inc. d/b/a ATU Telecommunications, *Memorandum Opinion and Order*, EB-00-MD-016, 16 FCC Rcd 2834 (2001)
  31. Re. Tariffs Filed by ACS of Anchorage, Inc, and the National Exchange Carrier Association, *Memorandum Opinion and Order*, CC Docket No. 02-36, FCC 02-160 (2002).
  32. *Moultrie Independent Telephone Company, Motion for Stay of Part 69.605(a) of the Commission's Rules and Petition for Declaratory Ruling, Request for Waiver of Part 36 of the Commission's Rules, Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service*, CC Docket No. 96-45, Order, FCC 01-292 (Oct. 5, 2001) (*Moultrie Order*).
  33. USAC 2002 Annual Report
  34. *Id.*
  35. News Release, FCC RELEASES AUDIT REPORTS ON RBOCs' PROPERTY RECORDS, Report No. CC 99-3, February 25, 1999